

Ely (Smith)

Disposition of the Quarantine Grounds
on Staten Island.

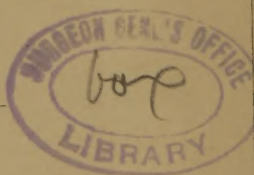
SPEECH

OF

HON. SMITH ELY,
Of Richmond,

IN THE ASSEMBLY OF NEW YORK,

April 3d and 4th, 1862.



New York:

FRANCIS & LOUTREL, STEAM PRINTERS AND STATIONERS,

45 Maiden Lane.

1862.

AN ACT

TO CONVEY THE

QUARANTINE GROUNDS ON STATEN ISLAND,

IN THE COUNTY OF RICHMOND,

FOR PUBLIC USES.

The People of the State of New York, represented in Senate and Assembly, do enact as follows:

SECT. 1. The commissioners of the land office are hereby authorized and required to sell and convey to the County of Richmond, for the price or sum of four thousand five hundred dollars, all the right, title, interest, property and estate of this State, in and to the lands and premises situated in the town of Castleton, in said County, taken and appropriated for a marine hospital, under an Act passed twenty-fifth of February, seventeen hundred and ninety-nine, and known as the Quarantine Grounds, excepting, nevertheless, so much thereof as has been ceded or sold to the United States.

SECT. 2. Such lands and premises shall be so conveyed and held by the said County solely for public use as a park and public landings, and for the erection thereon, as may hereafter, from time to time, be deemed expedient by the Board of Supervisors of said County, of buildings for county purposes, and also of public buildings for the town of Castleton, and for no other purposes whatsoever.

SPEECH.

MR. SPEAKER:—By request of the people of Richmond County, this bill was introduced, for the purpose of acquiring the lands in the town of Castleton, known as the Quarantine Grounds, to be used as a public park, by paying the price at which they were appraised by the Commissioners appointed by an Act of the Legislature of 1799, on their taking possession thereof in the name of the people.

As some of the members of this honorable body may have given but little attention to a subject so local in its nature, I will, if you please, make a statement of a few of the prominent facts in relation to it.

I will not attempt an extended review of a matter, which, though of vital importance to Richmond County, is probably not of so much interest to other parts of the State.

The Quarantine Hospitals were formerly established on Governor's and Bedloe's Islands in the bay of New York, those being portions of the County of New York.

After the hospitals had been on Bedloe's Island a few years, it was thought by some to be too near the city of New York, and that the sanitary condition of the city would be better protected by removing the establishment to Staten Island; but no owner of real estate on Staten Island could be found ready or willing to jeopard the lives or prosperity of his neighbors, by selling his property for such a purpose; consequently it became necessary, either to abandon the project, or to resort to coercive measures to accomplish it. Accordingly the Legislature of 1799, appointed commissioners to select a site on Staten Island, appraise the damage to its owners, and take possession in the name of the people.

What was the effect of thus empowering those Commissioners by that *purely impartial act*?

Was an obscure or isolated place selected for the reception of the deadly diseases to be imported by the foreign

and domestic commerce of the great commercial mart of America? By no means. On the contrary, the most conspicuous and beautiful part of the Island, and that which was the most (when they should have selected the least) accessible to the city, was seized upon and taken—from whom and for what? Not from the farmer, trader, or land monopolist, but from the holy precincts of the church, and perverted to the most deadly purpose—to a pest house of the most repulsive character. The first season after the Lazaretto was forced upon our County, there were 25 cases of yellow fever among the farmers outside the walls—24 of them fatal.

Under such circumstances could an increase of population and wealth be expected equal to that of other neighboring places, not made unhealthy by extraneous means? In 1800, the year after the aforesaid *impartial* act was passed, Kings County had but 1,177 inhabitants more than Richmond County. Now the City of Brooklyn (not the whole County of Kings) has more than 10 times the population and wealth of the entire County of Richmond. Brooklyn cannot be compared with any city on Staten Island, for Staten Island has no city, and will have none so long as the Quarantine incubus remains to destroy her prosperity.

Further to show the devastating effects produced, I will, if you please, call your attention to the rapid progress made by the towns and cities nearest to New York City, contrasted with Richmond County.

Brooklyn has gained in 10 years 135,907 inhabitants, or 104 per cent.; Flushing, in Queens County, has gained in 10 years 94 per cent.; Morrisiana, in Westchester County—unknown as a village in 1850—now has a population of 9,245; Newark, in New Jersey, had, in 1850, 38,891 inhabitants, now it has 71,941, making a gain in 10 years of 84 per cent.; Jersey City has gained in 10 years 154 per cent.; Hoboken has gained 266 per cent.; Bergen has gained 169 per cent.; Orange has gained 102 per cent.; Elizabeth has gained 103 per cent.; Rahway has gained 112 per cent.; Trenton, on the Delaware, has gained 166 per cent., while Richmond County has gained but 81 per cent.

Thus it is shown that Richmond County—the most beautiful and naturally the most desirable place in the vicinity of the great emporium—has not gained nearly so fast as any

of the others, and not half so much as the most distant one named, in the State of New Jersey.

Can the fact be attributed to any other cause than that of pestilence legislated upon Richmond County, otherwise one of the most health-generating counties in the State?

If that legislation had been as injurious to either Brooklyn or Jersey City, would they be as they now are—large and wealthy cities—or would the one so *peculiarly blessed* be anything more than a sparsely populated village, a receptacle for disease, a cemetery for the dead?

In proposing to receive the property alluded to on the terms specified, it may not be amiss to say that the proposition is made in strict conformity with justice to the State. When possession of the land was acquired, it was solely for the purpose of protecting the health of New York City. It has finished its usefulness in that particular, and in obedience to existing law, can no longer be made available for Quarantine patients, and it is much needed for public convenience. If it be thought that the State ought not to dispose of so valuable a tenure without greater compensation, we reply, by saying, that full compensation has been more than made. To arrive at that fact, consider, if you please, that if Staten Island had been kept entirely free from Quarantine, its wealth and population would now be more than quadrupled.

The ratable property of Richmond County is now \$8,000,000. If a floating hospital had been used for the last sixty years, instead of a permanent one, its present value would now be more than \$50,000,000; and hundreds of lives would have been saved, which have been sacrificed by persons being incarcerated within hospitals, the walls of which were so saturated with poisonous infection that the life of a sound man could not withstand its deadly influence, if confined in one of them for one week's time. If the island has been so greatly injured in its property (without reference to that which is of vastly more importance—the loss of life suffered by the inhabitants arising from exotic disease), the deprivation, to those who have recovered, of health, ease, comfort, time, amount of physicians', nurses', and apothecaries' bills, could not be compensated by the value of all the quarantine grounds in

Christendom. Is it a large concession for the State to make, to accept for twenty-five acres the price paid for thirty? Be it understood that the Commissioners helped themselves pretty freely, by taking more than they needed. They sold (or the State authorities did) five acres, including a large portion of the water front, to the United States. It is hardly to be believed that the State intended to enter into the business of real-estate speculation. If it did not, why should it expect or desire an advance on first cost? If the value of the land has risen, it has not been caused by the action of the State, but in spite of it. Not at State expense, but solely at the cost of Richmond County.

For every dollar that the quarantine grounds have appreciated, the property of the county has been depressed more than one hundred during the time of its oppression.

Another consideration should not be lost sight of. If the representation of Richmond County had been as great as was that of New York in 1799, could the latter have succeeded in obtaining legal authority for removing the hospitals from Bedloe's Island, in its own County, and forcing them on Staten Island, a neighboring County, against the determined opposition of Richmond County? New York County then had 13 members; now 17. Kings County then had 1 member; now 7—and two senators. Richmond then had one; it now has but *one*. Had Richmond been left entirely untrammelled, she might to-day, in her hour of *need*, have several representatives in this House, and at least one senator in the other, instead of having but one representative, and depending on the generosity of two more populous counties in the 1st Senatorial District, whether it shall ever have a voice in the Senate or no. Richmond County has sent but *one* senator to the Legislature in twenty years; has seldom had a representative, and never a senator, in Congress; or a judge of the Supreme Court.

Among the numerous grievances under which Staten Island has suffered for three score years, but few have been adverted to. More, and possibly much more alarming ones, might be presented; but I hope and trust that enough has been said to awaken a feeling of justice, as well as kindness, for a people whose rights have been so long ignored. Not because it was the disposition or intention of our pre-

decessors to do us a wrong, but there is great reason to believe that much prejudice and ill feeling have been engendered by those who ought to have been our friends.

The Quarantine has long been a prolific source of moral, physical, financial, and political corruption.

It is to be hoped that no other counties in the State will ever be cursed to the extent that Richmond County has been. If, unfortunately, such shall be the case, may the same degree of justice and sympathy be extended to those counties that Richmond is about to receive from their representatives!

Our foreign relations are such, at the present time, that it is possible the torch of the invading foe may soon be applied to some of the cities of our beautiful lakes. Then a time will come when the inmates of those devoted homes will require—and most *certainly* will receive—powerful aid from neighboring counties. Then, it is to be hoped, they can say, “we hesitated not to aid and *completely* relieve our friends in Richmond so soon as the necessity for so doing was made apparent. Now *we*, in our time of need, are reaping a full reward for the benefits promptly conferred on that occasion.”

MR. SPEAKER, I have stated that 25 persons (out of a very limited agricultural population) sickened of yellow fever the first year after the hospitals were legislated upon our County. Here we have the affidavit of Mr. Isaac Simonson, who swears that he was the occupant or lessee of the Quarantine Grounds at the time of their seizure, and that the first year after the contaminating “Pest Houses” were placed there, 23 or 25 persons sickened of “Yellow Fever,” himself among the rest, and that he was the only survivor.

Now, sir, was anything half so fatal ever heard of in this country before or since? Twenty-three to twenty-five persons to sicken and all but one to die, and that, too, in one of the most salubrious places on earth! Is it not positively *horrible*?

Notwithstanding the assertion of the *Hon.* member of the Chamber of Commerce, permit me to inquire if there be a *gentleman* on this floor who would not consider it downright murder, of the most alarming nature, to have disease, under shadow of law, forced upon his County, so deadly in

its effects as to take the lives of 24 of his neighbors, leaving himself alone, with a shattered constitution. If there be a man in this country who will say that such a transaction would be proper, I envy him not either *head* or *heart*. I have also stated that many lives had been sacrificed by being incarcerated within hospitals, the walls of which were saturated with poisonous infection. Here is a proof in point. Extract from Dr. Griscom's report:

"In the winter of 1852, four men were employed to cleanse the walls and ceilings of two wards, then unoccupied, in the New York Hospital. They had access to no place where sickness existed. They were engaged one week. McCoy, the boss, and Fleming, one of the workmen, sickened and died in less than three weeks; the laborer was taken sick, but recovered; the other (Haight) was not sick at all."

I will now, if you please, call your attention to what may be considered a business view of this subject; after all it is but a matter of dollars and cents. We are canvassing the amount to be paid and received for the property. If we can agree in this particular, no further debate need ensue.

Sir, I believe that whenever a public improvement is called for, the attempt is made to show that more good than harm will arise therefrom. For opening streets in cities, a portion of the benefits received is assessed upon the property so benefited, and paid to the owners of the property injured. Not all the good arising therefrom is so assessed; it is not necessary so to do; the gain must exceed the loss in the aggregate, otherwise the municipal authorities could not be induced to open or widen a street.

Sir, apply this rule, if you please, to the subject now under discussion. Many years since, at a period much beyond the recollection of any member of this House, it was thought that the health, comfort, prosperity—and more particularly the commerce of New York City—might be greatly promoted if means could be adopted to prevent the introduction of imported diseases in said City. To effect this much-desired object, a plan was resorted to, by which an adjacent County, which had always been extraordinarily healthy, was forced to receive all these deadly, infectious diseases, which

killed its inhabitants, and, in a great measure, prevented others from settling there. Sir, will any one undertake to say that the City so relieved, and through it the State and United States (the recipient of its revenues) was not enriched many millions of dollars every year, during the term of 58 years, from 1799 to 1857? Is it not now time, Sir, to take an account of damages sustained by the County so awfully oppressed? Can we not, now, with great propriety, open an account current in which Richmond County may be debited, not with valuable considerations (for she has received none) but with the damage done the State by a few individuals, unknown to the mass of the people, in destroying the obnoxious incubus, and with every other injury that could possibly arise therefrom. After all these debits are made against the patient, long-suffering, and numerically weak County of Richmond, then let her be credited with a *tithe* of the injuries done her, and what an astounding balance would be exhibited. It could not be enumerated by hundreds or thousands, it would require many millions of dollars to balance the unsettled account of sixty years standing. Sir, my constituents expect no such liquidation of a balance justly due them in accordance with the well established principle of mercantile law; they ask nothing of the kind. They say that the State, for its fancied and apparent security, took possession of twenty-five acres of farming lands, and having retained them until they can be no longer used for the extraordinary purposes for which they were seized, should now be released, that they may be converted into one of the most beautiful pleasure grounds in the world.

Sir, shall this great boon be granted, or shall the lands be sold in building lots, to be used for grog shops, gambling rooms, concert saloons, and other demoralizing purposes? It is to be hoped that this, the only opportunity that will ever present itself of creating a park for the inhabitants of the lower parts of the cities of Brooklyn and New York, as a delightful health-restoring place of recreation in their immediate suburbs, may be speedily improved by the generosity of this House.

I, at this moment, deeply sympathize with my predecessor who, sixty-five years since, stood upon this floor, unaided, to defend his constituents against an unprece-

dented wrong. What must have been his embarrassment and conscious weakness on discovering who his antagonists were? Could any one ordinary man hope successfully to contend against the power then brought to bear against him? He constituting but the one hundred and eighth, while his opponents of New York county were the one-eighth part, numerically, of the strength of the House. And that was not his greatest misfortune. That eighth part (or thirteen members) from New York, was led by one of the shrewdest managers that this country has produced. Sir, when we consider that that skilful politician was placed at the head of the committee on whose decision were depending the prosperity, health and lives of the inhabitants of Richmond County for the following sixty years, could the results have been considered doubtful?

Had Aaron Burr at that time represented Richmond County; had he then lived where he afterwards died, could that great calamity have befallen a quiet and unoffending people? No, Sir, never. Had Staten Island been kept free from the greatest curse ever legislated upon a county, she would not to-day find herself so feebly represented here. Her population and wealth would now entitle her to at least four members in this House, and one senator in the other.

Were it not trespassing too much on the time of this honorable body, it would afford me great pleasure to read letters received from gentlemen of the highest respectability, in New York and Richmond County, showing decidedly the great propriety of the proposed measure; but I will defer so doing for the present.

It occurred to me recently, while listening to the eloquent remarks made by gentlemen in favor of the Susquehanna Rail Road, that what was said then respecting taxes paid by the Counties of Broome, Delaware, Otsego and Schoharie, and appropriated in part to improving the northern counties of the State, (when those counties were asking and receiving nothing for their own localities), that those remarks could be applied to Richmond County with great propriety. It became necessary, last Summer, for me to examine the relative taxation of the different parts of the State. I then found that Richmond County paid more

than any other County, if either amount of business, capital, produce, population, personal or real property were made the standard of taxation. Further comparison is quite impossible. If those counties have not been enriched by the expenditure of the public treasure, they certainly have not been injured thereby. All the money which the State has appropriated for Richmond County has been for Quarantine purposes, and every dollar thus employed has injured it \$1,000. It may have spent \$100,000, there, which has produced such a depression of property, loss of health and life, that \$100,000,000, could not compensate.

The honorable member who boasts of his connexion with the Chamber of Commerce of the city of New York, *very unostentatiously* stated, that he had made himself acquainted with the Quarantine question and the merits of this bill, and made many assertions as facts, for which I can find no foundation. Now, Sir, what were his facts, and how did he prove them? He asserted that the Quarantine grounds were owned by a church in New York. I have here copies of the original title deeds, showing that they were taken from St. Andrew's Church, of Richmond County. That is fact No. 1. He next said that the same persons who destroyed the old Quarantine buildings, on the eastern side of the County, subsequently passed over to the western side, and burnt those at Seguin's Point. As it has never before been known who did the deed, permit me to inquire of the legal gentlemen of this House, whether a criminal prosecution cannot be made to lie against him as an accessory, unless he will turn State's evidence. He also said that after those buildings were burnt, many persons made large purchases of land for speculative purposes, the gentleman from Richmond included. Will he be kind enough to point out the property? The gentleman from Richmond has no recollection of ever having seen it. He opposes the bill because he has a remonstrance against it. Now, Sir, I desire to give the history of that remonstrance. Two days since the honorable member showed me a letter from one of his acquaintances, with a remonstrance against my bills. He read the letter, but asked me to say nothing of its contents; then exhibited the remonstrance, since read by him to this House, omitting,

at the same time, to read the signatures. On inquiring if he knew the writer, he replied, saying, that he had known him many years; that he knew him to be a large property owner on Staten Island. I remarked that the party alluded to was once a man of talent and respectable standing; that I had been informed that the real estate purchased by him was probably mortgaged for all that it would sell for; that he, being a lawyer, had kept the property in litigation for years, until that, or some other cause, had been the means of imprisoning him for a length of time; that *he* drew the remonstrance, on which were attached but three names, consisting of a chairman, vice-chairman, and secretary. The two former were unknown to me; the latter had been recently indicted, and convicted of a crime. Was that, Sir, a proper document to bring in here to embarrass and thwart a bill of any description in this Legislature? And should any man longer be permitted to retain a seat in a body whom he tried to mislead by such a contemptible subterfuge? So much for the *gentleman's facts*, and the *pure* and *unsullied* source from whence they emanated. Now I have a fact, such an one as *his* British friends would style "a fact as is a fact." A gentleman who has long been a resident of Staten Island, fearing that the people might have some cause of complaint against their representative, came here, and, after a careful examination, was satisfied that there was no good cause for censure, but expressed himself much pleased and edified by what he learned while here. He returned and stated to the remonstrants the *real facts*. They called a meeting, and tore all their names off the paper, and it came here in that state.

I have not yet quite done with the honorable member. He, in his usual *modest, candid* manner, and without a particle of arrogance, denounced this measure as absurd and impertinent.

Mr. PHELPS—I did not say you. I said the people of Richmond County.

Mr. ELY—Sir, am I not the representative of Richmond County? It is true I am not a *member* of the Chamber of Commerce of the City of New York, but I am the representative—and the only one—Richmond County has in this Legislature.

And the honorable member stated that the property is worth four times as much as I think it would probably sell for. If I have been correctly informed that is about as nearly correct as is the value he places upon the private property of a certain member of the Chamber of Commerce, of the City of New York.

A few years since, at a time when it became apparent that "Yellow Fever" on Staten Island was "Yellow Fever" in the City of New York, a proposition was made in the Chamber of Commerce to remove the Quarantine Hospitals, not for the benefit of Staten Island, but for the preservation of the local trade and health of New York. A member of that Board, and one who had been a member of the Board of Commissioners of Emigration, rose in his place and opposed the removal, inasmuch as it would cause himself and other importers to pay a greater sum for lightering their goods from a more distant point, than they were paying from the then Quarantine station. What remedy did that kind-hearted man recommend to prevent the destruction of his poor neighbors in the City of New York—of those who have no country seats to repair to when "grim death" was being brought upon them by those who *had* country seats, fish ponds, billiard rooms, old wines, and all the luxuries which help to make up the purse-proud snob? I ask what was the remedy proposed by this *christian* philanthropist? Will it be believed, when I state the *fact*, that he advised keeping the Hospitals where they were, purchasing more land, (whether by legislative aid or no, he did not say,) increasing the dimensions of that pestiferous nuisance, that had then existed for half a century, and which no other intelligent people would have borne half so long as we have done.

Sir, if that member of the Chamber of Commerce were standing on the "brink of destruction" by the side of a respectable Hottentot, his only companion in danger, and it were in the power of the inhabitants of Staten Island to protect the life of one, and *but one* of them, I hesitate not to say that I would insure the life of that Hottentot for a *very small* premium.